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ABSTRACT

Basic writers are defined as those whose home dialects are least like standard English. Given that all dialects of English are capable of conveying complex thought, the question facing educators is, Should students be made to learn and work in standard English, or should they be given the opportunity to express themselves in their home dialect? Basic writers, unfamiliar with the genres of academic writing, write according to discourse forms with which they are familiar, such as soap operas or grammar school history lessons. The question of whether students should be required to learn conventional genres or allowed to work in ones with which they feel comfortable is answered by standard English advocates who say that the standard forms are necessary for college work and by advocates of other forms who say that criteria for college success must change. In looking at academia as a language community in which language creates and organizes a world view, the clash between dialects becomes apparent. As basic writers learn the new world view, they become bicultural and are pressured into subsuming their less prestigious, less socially powerful world view in favor of the academic. (CRH)

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What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?

Patricia Bizzell

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What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?

Patricia Bizzell

I wish to propose an hypothesis for researching an answer to this question. For the time being, let me suggest that "basic writers" are those who are least well prepared for college. They may be defined in absolute terms, by features of their writing, or in relative terms, by their placement in a given school's freshman composition sequence, but either way, their salient characteristic is their outlandishness--their appeareance to many teachers and to themselves as the students who are most alien in the college community. Currently there are three major ways to describe what happens to these outlanders when they enter college. Each approach tends to focus on one element of basic writers' complex experienco. To frame my research hypothesis, I am seeking a more comprehensive approach.

One approach sees basic writers' entry into college as precipitating a clash among dialects. The basic writers are those students whose home dialects are least like Standard English, the preferred dialect in school. When their problems are seen in these terms, some teachers say that the solution is to help--or require--these students to learn Standard English. This solution is institutionalized in the composition course requirements at most colleges. Other scholars, such as James Sledd, have argued that the solution is to stop demanding that all school work be conducted in Standard English, and to give these students the option of either learning Standard English, if they so desire, or

writing and speaking in school in their home dialects.

It has been established that all dialects of English, whether Standard or non-Standard, are capable of conveying complex thought. Given this consensus, those who debate over requiring Standard English assume that the issue is whether thoughts, however complex, should be conveyed in Standard or in some other dialect. In other words, the thoughts are not supposed to be changed by the dialect in which they are conveyed. Advocates for requiring the Standard form often argue that although students can think complexly in their home dialects, unfortunately the larger society demands the Standard form and therefore if we wish to enable them to get ahead, we have to enable them to use it. Defenders of home dialects say that the effort to extirpate the home dialects presents such a barrier that students will learn very little while concentrating on the language problem. Hence James Britton, and his American followers such as Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch, would provide many opportunities in school for "expressive" speaking and writing in the students' home dialects as important modes of learning prior to, or perhaps instead of, "transactional" modes using the Standard dialect.

A second approach sees the problem of basic writers entering college as a clash, not of dialects, but of discourse forms. The focus here is not mainly on features of language, such as forms of the verb to be, but on features of texts, such as verbal devices used to achieve coherence. The ways of organizing information and convincing audiences with which basic writers are

most familiar are not the ways of winning arguments in academe, as Mina Shaughnessy has observed. These students do not know what Elaine Maimon calls the "genres" of academic writing, and, as David Bartholomae has shown, they will seek to shape their writing according to discourse conventions more familiar to them from other sources, such as soap operas or grammar-school history lessons on "great men."

It is not always clear in the discourse convention approach to what extent discourse conventions are to be regarded as surface features of writing. In other words, to what extent is adherence to discourse conventions a matter of pouring thoughts into "formal shells," as Brannon and Knoblauch disparagingly call them, or of actually generating thoughts that would not be accessible without the conventions? If the conventions are seen as surface features, then we get a version of the debate over requiring Standard English. Here the debate considers whether all students should be required to learn such conventional academic genres as the case study or the literature survey, or allowed to pursue the "same" intellectual work in genres with which they feel more comfortable, such as the journal. Advocates of requiring the academic genres argue that knowledge of them is necessary for success in college; advocates of other forms argue that the criteria for college success must change.

If, however, the discourse conventions are seen as generating, and not merely conveying, certain kinds of complex thinking, then the "same" intellectual work is not possible in different genres. For example, the journal would be seen as a genre that generates personal connections with classwork, such as

expressing religious revulsion for genetic research, but that discourages other kinds of thinking, such as surveying religiously motivated resistance to scientific research through the ages. According to this line of argument, students would need to learn other, more "academic" genres if they were to become able to perform more kinds of academic intellectual work. A corollary of this position is that whereas many genres, like the many dialects of English, are equally capable of generating complex thoughts, they are not capable of generating the *same* complex thoughts. Thus students will be thinking in different ways, depending upon the dialect and discourse forms with which they are familiar.

It is a short step, then, from seeing basic writers' problem as a clash of discourse conventions to seeing it as a clash of ways of thinking. Seeing the conflict this way, researchers such as Andrea Lunsford and Frank D'Angelo have turned to cognitive psychology for models to understand this conflict. In this third approach to understanding basic writers' problems, the developmental schemes of Jean Piaget or William Perry have been used to rank-order student writers, with basic writers placed at the least developed end of the scale. The teacher's task then becomes similar to the therapist's, in seeking ways to correct basic writers' cognitive dysfunctions. Other scholars argue that to use psychological models in this way is to stigmatize basic writers and to ignore the cultural bases of differences in thinking (see Bizzell, "Cognition").

I want to find an approach to the difficulties of basic

writers entering college that can take into account these differences in dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking. I think the notion of a language community will be helpful here--that is, a community that coheres because of common language-using practices. Perhaps all communities are in some sense language communities, although social class or geographic proximity, for instance, may also play a part in their cohesion. But the academic community is a community united almost entirely by its language, I think; the academic community is not coterminus with any social class, though it is more closely allied to some than to others. Like any other language community, the academic community uses a preferred dialect (so-called "Standard" English) in a convention-bound discourse (academic discourse) that creates and organizes the knowledge that constitutes the community's world-view. If we see the relation between dialect, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking in terms of a language community, then we can no longer see dialects or discourse conventions as mere conveyances of thoughts generated prior to their embodiment in language. Rather, dialect and discourse generate thoughts, constitute world-view. It would not be correct, however, to say that a language community's world-view is *determined* by its language, because that would imply that the world-view could not change as a result of interaction by the community with the material world, and we know that such changes do occur (see Kuhn). In order to participate in the community and its changes, however, one must first master its language-using practices. Thus basic writers, upon entering the academic community, are being asked to learn a new dialect and

new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is acquisition of a whole new world-view. Their difficulties, then, are best understood as stemming from the initial distance between their world-views and the academic world-view, and perhaps also from resistance to changing their own world-views that is caused by this very distance.

To understand their problem in these terms, we need to ask three questions: what world-views do basic writers bring to college? What is the new world-view demanded in college? And finally, do basic writers have to give up the world-views they bring to college in order to learn the new world-view?

The first of these questions has not yet been adequately answered, as far as I know. We do not know much about the world-views basic writers bring to college. Demographic information, on race or income for example, cannot lead to a satisfactory answer because there is no widely accepted model of the American class structure to which world-views could be linked. Assumptions about "working-class" world-views help to explain the school difficulties of certain groups of students in the research of Basil Bernstein in England, for example, and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in France. We cannot make similar assumptions because, unlike the European researchers, we cannot identify a working class securely enough to be able to form hypotheses about its world-view and so to test whether basic writers belong to this group. Some American researchers have argued that we should see basic writers as the products of an oral culture, so that differences of world-view become

differences between "literacy" and "orality" (see Ong, Farrell). Such analyses seek to attend to what the European researchers call class differences, in that oral culture seems to occur more frequently in certain social groups. The orality/literacy dichotomy, however, eventually flattens out such differences on behalf of the two main categories. Hence the variety of basic writers' cultural backgrounds and the differences in world-views arising from this variety are not taken into account.

We will find it hard to assess the difficulty of acquiring the academic world-view until we know how different it is from basic writers' home world-views. Even though we cannot now say how great the difference might be, since we do not know enough about basic writers' original world-views, basic writers' "outlandishness" in college strongly suggests that the difference is great and that for them, to a much greater degree than for other students, acquiring the academic world-view means becoming bicultural. We do not know how difficult it is to become bicultural, although evidence exists that this is possible (see Fishman). If with great effort students can acquire the academic world-view without having to give up their original world-views, we do not know what benefits might motivate the effort, although there is some evidence that such benefits exist (see Patterson, Hoggart).

Perhaps we could get a better idea of what benefits are to be derived from acquiring the academic world-view if we knew just what that world-view is. I think we do have a good start on an answer to the question of what world-view the college demands, in the developmental scheme of William Perry. I argue elsewhere that

this scheme is culture-bound (see Bizzell, "Perry"). In other words, it anatomizes an "intellectual and ethical development" that results from four years in a liberal arts college, not a genetically determined growth process. Furthermore, Perry happened to perform his research at Harvard, a college of long-standing and far-reaching influence in American academic life. Hence the world-view Perry describes can be taken as hegemonic, as the "target" world-view toward which basic writers are urged, to a greater or lesser degree, everywhere.

I do not wish to summarize Perry's entire scheme here, partly out of time considerations and partly because, since we cannot assume that basic writers are coming into the process from the same sort of cultural background as Perry's research subjects, we have no reason to assume they will go through the same stages on their way to the final developmental position. I will attempt, however, to summarize that final position as the one at which basic writers must eventually arrive, if they are to succeed in college, however they get there.

Perry finds that the young men who have completed the process he describes see the world as a place in which there are no "Absolutes," no standards of right and wrong that hold good for all times and places. They feel that anyone who still sees the world as governed by Absolutes is epistemelogically provincial. The liberal arts college, in contrast, requires the comparative study of ideas as the only way to choose among competing standards, to arrive at an informed judgment. Perry states that the essential component in the world-view of the

"liberally educated man" is the willingness "to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders his data and the assumptions he is making, and to compare these with other thoughts that other men might have" (39). The ou'come of his deliberations is that he chooses to make "Commitments" to certain ideas, projects, and people, Commitments which will order his adult life.

On what basis are these Commitments made? Perry implies that their content will be strongly influenced by the allegiances students bring with them to college, to a particular religion for example. At the same time, however, their form will be influenced by academic standards of logic, evidence, and so on. Hence the adult Commitment to a religion is a decision to build an area of meaningfulness, through participation in a group that shares one's sense of what is important, in a world essentially without intrinsic meaning. While Perry certainly does not wish to suggest that liberal arts education is destructive of religious faith, he implies that faith will never be the same again--that after one has fully entered into the academic world view, one cannot willfully return to a world-view constituted by Absolutes when one is in church. The young men who have completed the process Perry describes see themselves as having accepted the individual responsibility of constructing meaning in their world, while acknowledging that this responsibility can only be accomplished through participation in like-minded groups.

If Perry is right, then the academic world-view makes a strong bid to control all of a student's experience. The student is asked to take a certain distance on all of his or her

Commitments, to weigh them against alternatives, and to give allegiance only as a result of a careful deliberative process. In this sense, the academic world-view cannot coexist peacefully with another world-view in which standards for commitment are different--for example, in which a father is authorized to make his children's choices. Perry implies that if one's pre-college world-view includes seeing one's father's decisions as law, then one should certainly take one's father's wishes into account when determining adult Commitments. But one cannot both follow Father's decisions unquestioningly, and weigh them as only one factor, however important, in one's own decision-making process.

It seems, then, that biculturalism is likely to be very difficult when the academic world-view is one of the world-views involved, because the academic seeks to subsume other world-views to which the student may retain allegiance. The privileged position of the academic world-view in society makes it seem an even more domineering partner. In other words, basic writers may feel that they are being asked to abandon their less prestigious, less socially powerful world-views in favor of the academic. Richard Rodriguez is one former basic writer who has written of the pain his conversion to the academic world-view caused him, with its attendant estrangement from home.

It could be argued, however, that the home world-view, especially if it is associated with a social group of relatively little power, has a better chance of surviving if some who hold allegiance to it are also sufficiently familiar with the academic world-view to wield power in the larger society. And this power

will be not just the power to secure one's own economic advantage, legitimate as such aspirations may be. The student who sees his mastery of the academic world-view only as a means to personal advancement has not really mastered this world-view, for, as Perry has shown, it calls ultimately for Commitments to one's like-minded groups. These groups in which one enacts one's Commitments should be seen as language communities--all communities are also language communities, whatever else may hold them together. The mature student, then, in making the Commitments to which he or she is urged by the academic world-view, comes to appreciate the value of all language communities as the only sites in which Commitments can be acted upon, and thus worth preserving. This awareness of the value of communities can help to prevent deracination from being the inevitable outcome of acquiring the academic world-view.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that we need a study of basic writers similar to that conducted by Perry--a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture as they move on through their college educations. Such a study would help to answer the other two questions I raise above: we would get a better idea of what world-views basic writers bring to college, and we would hear what they themselves think about the cost of acquiring a new one. I suspect that they will not find the comparative, deliberative stance of the academic world-view as hard to accept as Perry's more sheltered students do. The basic writers already know that their home communities' standards are not the only ones possible--they learn this more immediately and forcefully when

they come to college than do students whose home world-views are closer to the academic. I also suspect that they will find the stakes for accepting this world-view higher than for Perry's students--given the greater difference between this world-view and their pre-college world-views, basic writers have more to lose. But precisely because of the hegemonic power of the academic world-view, my hypothesis is that they will also find its acquisition well worth the risks.

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